

Get Ready  
By Judi Geistlinger  
Advent 1A  
Isaiah 2:1-5 and Matthew 24:36-44  
November 27, 2022  
First Presbyterian Church and Windsor of Savoy

After listening to the scriptures for this morning, you might wonder if we are in the right season at all. The tree is up and decorated by some lovely folks who sprung into action while the Cuba contingent was traveling. The wreaths are all in place. It's beginning to look a lot like Christmas, but today's readings are anything but Christmassy. Where is the pregnant Mary? Where are those shepherds? I could really use a comforting story of old.

We are in the season of Advent. We never start Advent with something soft and baby-blue or carols about a manger, or with people holding candles singing, let there be peace on earth. After all, today is New Year's Day on the church calendar. "We start our new Christian year with an apocalyptic text like this one with a jarring appeal for urgency."<sup>1</sup>

The first Sunday of the Christian year is usually spent thinking about how this is all going to end. We get a vision of what the end of time as we know it may look like. And frankly this can be an alarming passage for those of us who just are not quite sure how we stand with God. What is this business about one will be taken from the two while grinding their meal? Sure, there are days when I would just love to be lifted out of the hassles of life, but really, is this how we are going to start getting ready this season?

Poet Ann Lewin wrote the following entitled: Advent

Advent

Season when dual citizenship holds us in awkward tension.  
The world, intent on spending Christmas,  
Eats and drinks its way to oblivion after dinner.  
The kingdom sounds insistent warnings:  
repent, be ready, keep awake, he comes.

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<sup>1</sup> Theodore Wardlaw, Austin Theological Seminary <http://covenantnetwork.org/sermon&papers/wardlaw-12-04.htm>

Like some great fugue the themes entwine.  
The Christmas carols, demanding our attention in shops and pubs,  
bore their insistent way through noise of traffic;  
Underneath, almost unheard, the steady solemn theme of Advent.

With growing complexity, clashing, bending,  
rivals for our attention,  
themes mingle and separate,  
Pulling us with increasing urgency,  
Until in final resolution, the end attained,  
harmony rests in awe-full stillness, and  
The child is born.  
He comes,  
Both Child and Judge.  
And will he find us  
Watching?<sup>2</sup>

In church we are in the not-yet stage of Christmas. My sometimes-grinchy self is glad I no longer have to shake my fist at the people who had their trees up and lit before Thanksgiving. I mean, really...before Thanksgiving is no time for lit Christmas trees! *Can I get an AMEN?* We are in the Get Ready stage of the season.

Our next thought might logically be, “for what, exactly, are we getting ready?”  
Excellent question.

With Thanksgiving this past week, many of us were planning menus and family gatherings and getting ready by shopping for turkeys or pies and all the trimmings.

The official shopping season began a couple days ago on Black Friday and many folks were getting ready for Christmas by waiting in lines for special deals or going online to shop from the sofa. And yet, we have much **more** to prepare for Christmas than what is under our tree, don't we? There are the parties, the concerts (like this afternoon's do-it-yourself Messiah), the tree to put up and

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<sup>2</sup> Ann Lewin, 1986 for First Sunday of Advent in [Resources for Preaching and Worship, Year B, 2002](#).

decorate, the cookies to bake, the cards to write. We are not even in December yet and my head is beginning to swim with everything that 'needs to be done' in under a month.

The month of November, for me, was spent figuring out our plans for worship for the eight worship services we are having between now and December 25. I am grateful for such wonderful partners with amazing patience to meet repeatedly with me...thanks Joe, Matt, Rachel, and the worship team for thinking through the upcoming services. Getting ready with the right themes and words and music to lead us to Christmas. We are nearly ready for that, *but we could use a few more volunteers to light the Advent candles.*

Rachel helped our Cuba travel contingent get ready for our trip. As part of this congregation with a covenant relationship with the good people of Iglesia Presbiteriano Reforma de Luyano, you all donated needed items for us to bring in our bags. The relationship is so complicated between our countries. They need so much materially; and we have so much. It sure would be simpler if we could just ship needed items over, but it does not work that way, unfortunately. We wish we could send money so they can buy things that the government does not have in their stores, but alas we cannot send dollars. We had to carry cash in Euros and document every penny we spent with paperwork to file for each government to stay in the limits of what is allowed legally.

And get ready we did...from packing enormous suitcases we planned to leave behind, making sure they were each under 50 pounds each, distributing medicines, yarn, clothing, rechargeable lamps (for blackout periods they still have) and more supplies, so we did not appear to be trying to sell the items. Rachel handed us envelopes of cash offerings from our congregation to carry individually so we stayed legal, under the limits of what is permissible. We met at the airport to travel the third Thursday in November, ready or not.

My heart, however, was not ready. I dearly love the people I have met in Luyano. There are warm smiles and kisses on cheeks every time you meet or say farewell. Our brothers and sisters are over-flowing with love and graciousness every time we see them. I try to keep tabs on them through Facebook from home, and the

more I read the less I wanted to go. *Not at all* because I did *not* want to see them, to be with them, but because I did not want to take anything away from them. I wanted no one to have to sacrifice for me. As we were on one of the three planes to Havana a week ago Thursday, I read a translated statement about the things one of our sisters there could and could not buy at the government store, but her question haunted me, “What am I going to feed my boys for the next three days?” People wait in hours-long lines, only to get to the front of the line and no food is available. It is heart-wrenching to read those things, especially about people you have met and with whom you shared your life, even if for just a few days.

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My first trip in July of 2015 included somewhat easier restrictions and was before the pandemic further wrecked their economy with no access to tourist dollars. That first trip with young people from our church, one of my fondest memories was the amazing food, and especially ripe tropical fruit every day, at every meal. Our favorite food item of all was the freshly squeezed pitchers of mango, guava, and papaya juices for breakfast every day. We loved it. That fresh juice was made from fruit they peeled and squeezed in the kitchen of the church, a delicious gift of love and service.

This trip, we arrived after 11 hours of travel and a 30-minute bumpy rented-bus ride with host Daniel, to the gathering room of the church with hot coffee and tea, treats and, a pitcher of **fresh mango juice**.

-----Mango Juice slide---



I knew the mangos are not in season in late November and wondered how in the world they could offer this generous gift of hospitality.

Daniel told us the church had been planning for our arrival to honor their 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary for a very long time. They planned to celebrate and be gracious hosts. They had planned to offer whole pitchers of out of season, freshly squeezed, tropical juice for their guests. To do this, they sliced and froze the fruit in the summer, waiting for our arrival. It was not until the end of the trip that I realized this gift was even more amazing. Cuba's power grid failed repeatedly this summer, from hurricanes and fires at infrastructure facilities. Our brothers and sisters ran generators on precious fuel to keep the freezers running, so they could offer us these gifts. They were ready to serve us. Oh my word. I felt so utterly unworthy of the effort.

I do not want to be seen as an ugly American demanding my share since I have the means to purchase it. Very few Cubans are overweight because food is scarce. I lost weight in my four days away, not because there was insufficient food, but because I ate smaller portions so there might be leftovers for our hosts. I don't want anyone to go hungry because I took the food that could have gone to them.

But you see, that is not how our hosts saw it at all. Their hearts are always ready to receive guests because they view it as a spiritual exercise for the community, to share, to show kindness, to offer hospitality because they might be entertaining angels unaware. Cubans are known for their gracious and generous hospitality. They live their faith in concrete, tangible, and sacrificial ways. They give of their best, no matter how much or how little they have.

We, too, are called to live our faith out loud, in concrete, tangible ways. Our brothers and sisters in Cuba show us their hope, their hospitality, their love in action. They are ready to embody and display their faith.

Today's readings remind us we are to get ready, to be prepared for the end to come. Our gospel passage tells us that we do not know when our number will be up, nor when Christ will return. A young colleague of mine and father of two young boys, died suddenly last month when the car containing four best friends on their way to a surprise birthday party crashed into a tree. We never expect death of people so young and vital to come so suddenly.

How are we to live, then? Full of despair in the not knowing? Or do we get ourselves ready for anything at any time?

<sup>36</sup> “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>37</sup> For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.

...

Therefore, you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

If you are anything like me, I hear these words and think, “seriously, in this season I’m supposed to be ready, for what exactly? Lord, is it one more thing for me to keep in the forefront of my mind? I’m just not sure I can do this one more thing.”

One sermon talked about a skit from the British television show from the 1970’s called Monty Python. The skit, called “The Spanish Inquisition” has a man being questioned in a way that surprises him.

“The man in the skit says, ‘Mr Wentworth just told me to come in here and say that there was trouble at the mill, that’s all – I don’t expect a kind of Spanish Inquisition.’ As if on cue, inquisitors burst into the room and one of them says, “NOBODY expects the Spanish Inquisition! Our chief weapon is surprise...surprise and fear...fear and surprise.... Our two weapons are fear and surprise...and ruthless efficiency.... Our *three* weapons are fear, surprise, and ruthless efficiency...and an almost fanatical devotion to the Pope.... Our *four*...no... *Amongst* our weapons.... Amongst our weaponry...are such elements as fear, surprise.... I’ll come in again.” The inquisitors exit the scene to re-enter and begin the speech again.

Nobody *expects* the Spanish Inquisition. “If the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into” (Matthew 24:43). The Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [http://maryhinkle.typepad.com/pilgrim\\_preaching/2004/11/the\\_element\\_of\\_.html](http://maryhinkle.typepad.com/pilgrim_preaching/2004/11/the_element_of_.html) for 2004.

Jesus tells us he is coming back. And more than that, he is telling us to be ready, even for the Spanish inquisition.

Jesus gives us another directive in this passage...keep awake. To pay attention, to look for God and even expect to see God.

The Message translation says of our last gospel verse, “You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up.”<sup>4</sup>

Monday morning, the morning of our departure, our breakfast table was full of old and new friends. We reflected on our time together celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Luyano congregation with four people from the Austin church who have been in relationship and visiting for 25 years, and our congregation who have visited and been committed for over 10 years in our own covenant with Luyano, yet had not met each other before Friday morning.

Daniel’s mother-in-law Elda Marín Hernández was with us for the celebration weekend and blessed us with a reflection on Psalm 133 she wrote Monday morning. In it she said, (as translated by Google translate):

**- 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary photo**



“When in another language they talk about how to build more bridges and strengthen the old ones.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+24%3A36-44&version=MSG>

When one thinks that the others are giving and those feel that they are receiving

As the years pass, the hair turns white and the legs do not respond in the same way, however the shine in the eyes does not go out.

When three communities communicate and two of them meet for the first time at our table, it feels as if time and space do not exist.

When one has the privilege of seeing the face of God face to face and living, then there is no other choice:

"There the Lord sends blessing, and eternal life."

Thank you, Lord. Amen."<sup>5</sup>

Our sister in Luyano told us she glimpsed the face of God around table. What a gift our time together was for all of us. The faith of our siblings in Christ is indeed humbling, for they share their deep and trusting faith with such ease. Every time we visit, I receive so much love.

You know, we have the opportunity to see God in the faces of those we meet right here. The thing is, our hearts have to be ready and we must be looking, even expecting that we will meet God. We have to remember what is truly important, not the lists, not the many to-do items that pop up this time of year.

Matthew tells us, "You have no idea when the Son of Man is going to show up."<sup>6</sup> So let's be on the watch, because we might just meet God in the person of those we see right here and now and especially those we serve. For as you do to the least of these, you do it unto me, says the Lord.

Amen

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<sup>5</sup> Reflection on Psalm 133:1 by Elda Marín Hernández, Iglesia Presbiteriana de Luyanó, 21 de noviembre 2022

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew+24%3A36-44&version=MSG>